

University of Dundee

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

Visual Narration in Comics and Graphic Novels

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I, Yufei Gong, hereby declare that I have written this thesis, and I have conducted the research presented and summarised within. The work is original and has not been previously accepted for a degree. This research was conducted as part of my **MDes (by Research)** degree at the University of Dundee, between October 2020 and 31 August 2021.

Signed



Date 15/Sep/2021

‘Viktor’ Yufei Gong – Masters Research

Title:

Visual Narration in Comics and Graphic Novel

The past year I have investigated storyboards and the processes of visual narration. I have also looked at Illustration, and the first experiment in photo-etching. I see visual narration as influenced by the camera's framing, and through the use of the imaginary camera, I have drawn storyboards and made many pages of compositions.

Research Questions/Hypothesis as proposed for continuing in a PhD:

Visual artists and designers utilize different kinds of visual language, for instance, the angle of camera, perspective, value and storyboard. Photography and the conventions that this medium imposes have become almost 'second nature' in the framing of images as they are seen in contemporary comics and graphic novels. In eastern and western countries comics and illustrations are well run by mature commercial models, distinctive storytelling genres in both visual and language aspect in two regions are developed over time. Occasionally, the text and images subtly contrast, show and telling two different stories, making the reader complicit in understanding less-than-visible psychological truths, for example.

- What are the main features of the visual narrative genres in western and eastern culture? Casually, visual designers and artists get inspiration from other cultural backgrounds when discovering creative themes or learning narrative methods. So, how do storytelling styles in west and east area influence each other mutually?
- How do western and eastern cultural values influence their own storytelling styles?
- And as a graphic novel artist/storyteller/illustrator- how can my own practice be adapted to offer nuanced, psychological insight through character development and reflective style that challenges the viewer?

Aims and objective of research:

I will analyze and summarize how people in comics, movies, animations and the realm of conceptual illustration design usually translate their ideas into visual language, starting from

the history of these visual art genres in western and eastern cultures. Learning their initial forms and how they developed over time, in order to find a way which could be well accepted by both western and eastern audiences and readers. The aim of this initial research will be to establish the conventions which have led to the current freedom allowing graphic novel artists to 'break' these traditional forms, relying upon viewers and readers who are able to leap beyond strict conventions and grasp new meanings in altered formats. Through the work with materials and modes that break away from these traditions (or who, properly speaking, work from the basic understanding and innovate with new variations) I aim to lay the critical foundation for understanding how conflicting treatments of text and images allow for a subtle comprehension of material that works with storytelling in a much more nuanced and complex manner than straightforward linear and superficial stories.

Research Context:

The American film *The Good Earth* (1937) was the first attempt in which the western world applied Chinese peasants and village as the theme of film. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the production company of this movie, deliberately considered the selection of actors and actresses, the selection of locale and adaption of the original novel, in a concession to the American audiences in early 20th century, but originally restored the life in Chinese countryside as much as possible.

The American video game *Ghost of Tsushima* produced by *Sucker Punch Productions* (Seattle, America), illustrated a war between the Mongol empire and Feudal Japan in the Kamakura era. "The actual history might have been moved like a one-way victory by Mongols, but you are made it so that Jin and his uncle really have some fighting back to do against the Mongols", said Nate Fox, creative director of Sucker Punch Productions, and tried to adapt real history into a traditional American heroic "Robin Hood" theme. But this gained success in attracting players around the world to samurai culture, spectacular Japanese scenery and characteristic architecture.

Japanese culture is the most representative culture which has the traditional eastern form

and blends western technology and genres. In addition, modern Korean art has the same feature. Katsushika Hokusai who is one of the most famous Japanese *ukiyo* painting artists, blended western drawing skill in his traditional Japanese drawing and influenced what emerged as western impressionism as well. He is also deemed as the first creator of Japanese manga.

Korean artists such as Galgoo, Paristo and Sapyuno who work as the leader artists in the Korean internet game *Dungeon and Fighters* are good at utilizing both eastern comics and animation character style with oil painting textures and three-dimensionality in western art.

How eastern and western examples may provide useful forms of narrative in storyboards, artwork and text will help serve as a basis and foundation for my analysis, as well as my own creative practice.

Significance:

People nowadays are no longer satisfied with native theme creation and seek a degree of sophistication in their reading and viewing. They want to identify with the anti-hero as much as with the heroic, understanding that the nature of humankind is not strictly binary opposites, only black and white, but deeply nuanced, complex, vulnerable and strong, and at times even contradictory. But readers accept that a completely strange and different culture is also not a short-term work, in the same way that 'serious literature' in the form of a novel or feature-length film are sustained works of art. Readers certainly need a way which they are challenged and stimulated to stretch their thinking in order to learn the things that they are not familiar with. My research is to find a common method to fit the reading and comprehending habit of people from both eastern and western cultures, in ways that combine image and text, and in a form that allows for the material to be as complex as the best of world literature in novels and films.

Proposed research methodology and methods:

Visual storytelling should not be confined to how to translate story into comics or

illustration directly. Storyboard is one of the most forthright forms of visualizing a story. Character design, scene design and item design could also be able to imply lots of information that may influence readers' understanding of an artists' idea. My research methods will include close readings, viewing of films, radical rearrangements of storyboard elements to test alternative narrative structures, discussing psychological traits and how they are read with other peer researchers, practice-led research which involves creating a shorter version of a story with contrasting elements and complex character development in an imaginary setting. So, I intend to come out with some storyboards and concept design which can indicate the character and scene in the story. Storyboard and concept design draft can make readers pay more attention on the core and insight of design itself rather than the exterior of the comics or illustration. By systematically analyzing the process of how artist participate in the artwork, we can clearly figure out the model of thinking of artists from eastern or western countries. Then I will deploy audience/reader questionnaires and collect this data and analyze these. And finally, my research will be summarized as a predominantly qualitative summary based on aesthetic analysis, cultural values and any emergent national preferences in understanding the treatment of contrasting text and images.

Plan of work:

In year 1:

- I will read widely across Eastern and Western comics and graphic novels, keeping annotated reading notes. These will be used later in my analysis of work.
- I will try to formulate my own outline of what makes a challenging storyboard, and continue to consult with comic artists, scholars of graphic novels, publishers, readers reviews, films, illustrators, and fine art artists who make a living from drawing and selling prints.
- I will take the research integrity modules, the 5-session teaching in Higher Education; assist in teaching a drawing upskilling module under a lead artist; and continue to refine my writing skills in English and general English level in the In-session English provided by the University.
- I will continue drawing, learn more extensive printmaking skills in order to expand

my range of finished outputs, attend storyboard workshops, and work with a curator to prepare a pilot exhibition of work for the public.

- I will take classes with the OPD, in order to learn how to write a research questionnaire most usefully, and how to analyse the resultant data.
- I will make an application to the Research Ethics committee for ethical clearance in using a reader's questionnaires and gaining their permission to record data.
- By the end of the first year after working closely with my supervisors, I will have (re-)confirmed my title and research plan, refined the research methods, and confirm the final output(s) after two additional years of work, and go through the Upgrade process.

In Year 2:

- I aim to prepare a shorter graphic narrative that tests the ability of readers to understand a challenging narrative that contrasts text with images.
- I aim to do this in two languages, Mandarin and English, but with the same imagery, in order to use reader's questionnaires in two countries, looking for differences in their cultural values and individual understandings.
- I will continue making new work, reading, note taking, and training as above.
- By the end of the Year 2, I will have written my Research Methods summary (chapter), and the analysis of the pilot project graphic novel, which would include the 2-nation questionnaires.

In Year 3:

- Continue with the larger creative practice work.
- Have a larger exhibition (possibly with the assistance of one or two peer curators) in the UK and in China (perhaps one of them virtually)
- Ask the audience that views/reads this work to complete a questionnaire (which may be improved from the first questionnaire I used in Year 2), which I will then collect and analyze.
- Complete the writing up of the remaining studies and submit by the end of 36 months.

Bibliography:

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